

You're *the* Historian



The Bloody Massacre,
engraving by Paul Revere, 1770

Comparing Accounts of the Boston Massacre

On the night of March 5, 1770, Captain Thomas Preston sent British troops to protect the Customs House in Boston from a group of colonists who had gathered nearby. Twenty minutes later, the troops had killed or wounded 11 people. The tragedy became known as the Boston Massacre. What happened that night? You're the historian.

Read the two accounts of the Boston Massacre below. One is Captain Preston's report of the event. The other is a colonist's account that quotes eyewitness Samuel Drowne. After reading the accounts, answer the questions and complete the activities that follow.

From Captain Thomas Preston's account

On Monday night . . . about 9 some of the guards came to and informed me the town inhabitants were assembling to attack the troops. . . . In a few minutes after I reached the guard, about 100 people passed it and went towards the custom house where the king's money is lodged. They immediately surrounded the sentry posted there, and with clubs and other weapons threatened to execute their vengeance on him. . . .

I immediately sent a noncommissioned officer and 12 men to protect both the sentry and the king's money, and very soon followed myself to prevent, if possible, all disorder, fearing lest the officer and soldiers, by the insults and provocations of the rioters, should be thrown off their guard and commit some rash act. . . .

Nay, so far was I from intending the death of any person that I suffered the troops to go . . . without any loading in their [guns]; nor did I ever give orders for loading them. . . .

The mob still increased and were more outrageous, striking their clubs or bludgeons one against another, and calling out come on you rascals, you bloody backs, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare. . . .

At this time I was between the soldiers and the mob . . . endeavoring all in my power to persuade them to retire peaceably, but to no purpose. They advanced to the points of the bayonets, [and] struck some of them. . . . A general attack was made on the men by a great number of heavy clubs and snowballs being thrown at them, by which

all our lives were in imminent danger, some persons at the same time from behind calling out, damn you bloods—why don't you fire. Instantly three or four of the soldiers fired, one after another, and directly after three more in the same confusion and hurry. . . .

The whole of the melancholy affair was transacted in almost twenty minutes. On my asking the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said that they heard the word fire and supposed it came from me. This might be the case as many of the mob called out fire, fire, but I assured the men that I gave no such order; that my words were, don't fire, stop your firing. In short, it was scarcely possible for the soldiers to know who said fire, or don't fire, or stop your firing.

*Crispus Attucks, the first colonist
to die in the Boston Massacre*



From the colonist's account

Samuel Drowne [a witness] declares that, about nine o'clock of the evening of the fifth of March current, standing at his own door in Cornhill, he saw about fourteen or fifteen soldiers. . . . [The soldiers] came upon the inhabitants of the town, then standing or walking in Cornhill, and abused some, and violently assaulted others as they met them; most of them were without so much of a stick in their hand to defend themselves, as he clearly could discern, it being moonlight, and himself being one of the assaulted persons.

All or most of the said soldiers he saw go into King Street (some of them through Royal Exchange

Land), and there followed them, and soon discovered them to be quarreling and fighting with the people whom they saw there, which he thinks were not more than a dozen. . . .

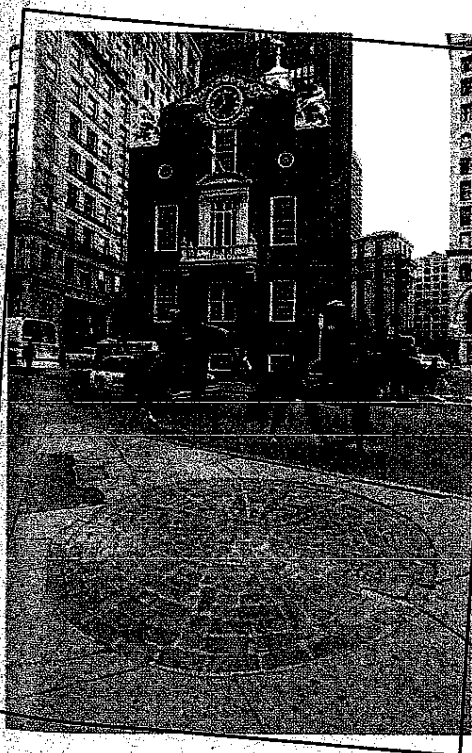
The outrageous behavior and the threats of the said party occasioned the ringing of the meeting house bell . . . which bell . . . presently brought out a number of the inhabitants, who . . . were naturally led to King Street, where [the British] had made a stop but a little while before, and where their stopping had drawn together a number of boys, round the sentry at the Custom House. . . .

There was much foul language between them, and some of them, in consequence of his pushing at them with his bayonet, threw snowballs at him, which occasioned him to knock hastily at the door of the Custom House. . . .

The officer on guard was Captain Preston, who with seven or eight soldiers, with firearms and charged bayonets, issued from the guardhouse, and in great haste posted himself and his soldiers in front of the Custom House, near the corner aforesaid. In passing to this station the soldiers pushed several persons

with their bayonets, driving through the people in disturbance. This occasioned some snowballs to be thrown at them, which seems to be the only provocation that was given. . . .

Captain Preston is said to have ordered them to fire, and to have repeated the order. One gun was fired first; then others in succession, and with deliberation, till ten or a dozen guns were fired; or till that number of discharges were made from the guns that were fired. By which means eleven persons were killed or wounded.



*The site of the Boston Massacre
in present-day Boston*

Understanding the Issue

1. On what events of the night of March 5, 1770, do the two accounts excerpted here agree?
2. On what descriptions of the events do the two accounts differ?
3. As the historian, how do you assess the credibility of the two accounts?

Activities

1. **Investigate** What happened to Captain Preston after the events of March 5? What were the immediate results of the Boston Massacre? Check other sources, including those available on the Internet.
2. **Mock Trial** Role play a mock trial of the Boston Massacre. Include witnesses, a prosecutor, a defense attorney, a judge, and a jury.